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NEW YORK FROM THE FLATIRON

by Edgar Saltus.

From Munsey's Magazine.

July 1905.

"Before the Panjandrum Comes"

(Eight titled views of the city from the
Flatiron Building, by Vernon Howard Bailey.)

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MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE.

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NEW YORK FROM THE FLATIRON.

BY EDGAR SALTUS.

THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY PANORAMA IN THE WORLD—A SURVEY OF THE AMERICAN METROPOLIS FROM ITS FOCAL POINT AT THE CROSSING OF ITS TWO MOST FAMOUS THOROUGHFARES, BROADWAY AND FIFTH AVENUE.

'WHAT do you know of New York?' too, of paradise. Manhattan may typify both. It represents other things also. "Only what I have read in Dante," The latter, mainly, are superlatives. was the bleak reply. From the top floors of the Flatiron you Dante told of the inferno. He told, get an idea of a few. On one side is

Madison Square Garden and Tower.

East River.

Long Island City.



Madison Square.

Appellate
Court-House.

Dr. Parkhurst's
New Church.

Dr. Parkhurst's
Present Church.

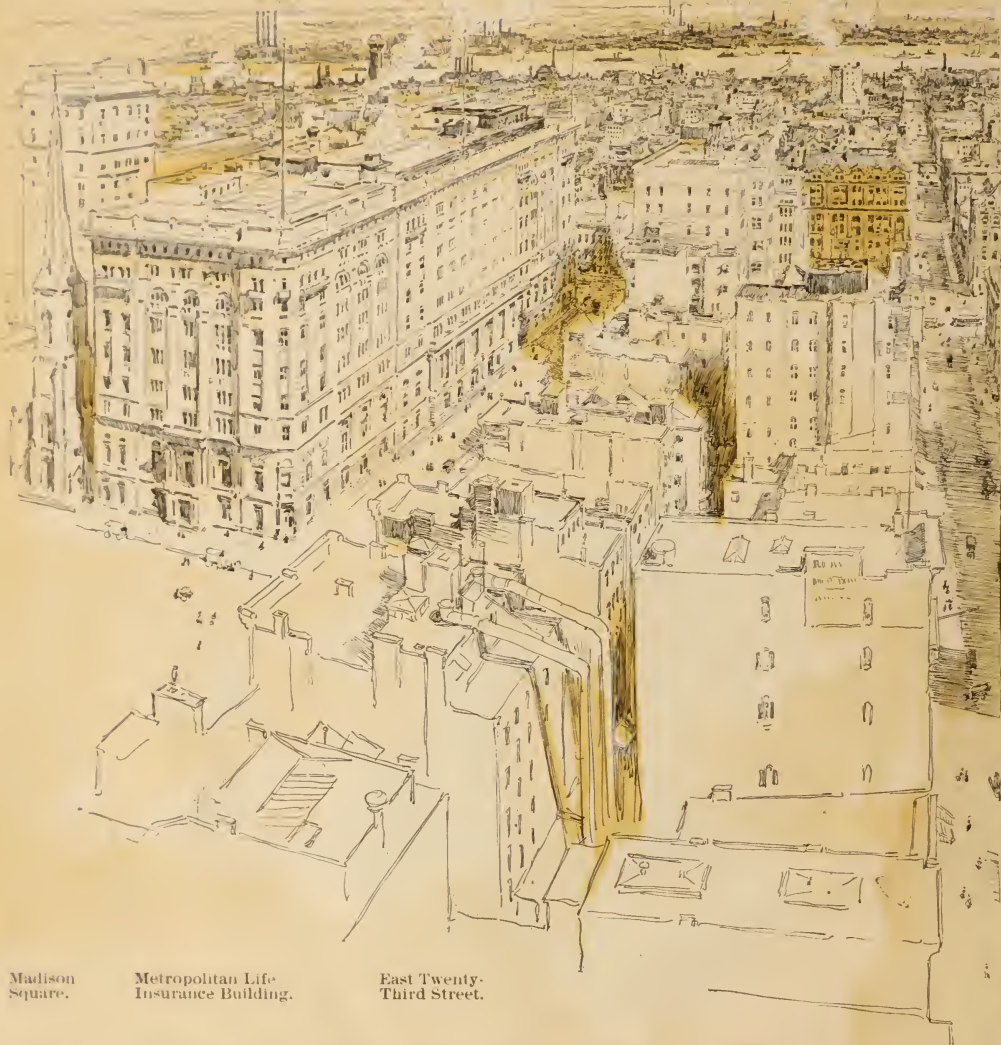
VIEW FROM THE UPPER FLOORS OF THE FLATIRON BUILDING, LOOKING TO THE NORTHEAST ACROSS MADISON SQUARE TO THE UPPER EAST SIDE OF NEW YORK AND THE EAST RIVER, WITH LONG ISLAND IN THE DISTANCE.

Broadway. Barring trade routes, Broadway is the longest commercial stretch on the planet. On the other side is Fifth Avenue. Barring nothing, Fifth Avenue

The beetles are cabs; the ants are beings—primitive but human, full of soap-bubble loves and hates, of ephemeral cares and joys as insecure, hurrying

Greenpoint.

East River.



Madison
Square.

Metropolitan Life
Insurance Building.

East Twenty-
Third Street.

VIEW FROM THE FLATIRON BUILDING, LOOKING TO THE EAST, AND ACROSS THE EAST RIVER TO GREENPOINT AND WILLIAMSBURG —

is the richest thoroughfare in the world. From the top floors of the Flatiron each looks meager, almost mean. In them are things that you would take for beetles, others that seem to you ants.

grotesquely over the most expensive spot on earth. They hurry because everybody hurries, because haste is in the air, in the effrontery of the impudent "step lively," in the hammers of the ceaseless

skyscrapers ceaselessly going up, in the ambient neurosis, in the scudding motors, in the unending noise, the pervading scramble, the metallic roar of the city.

the west is a fourth. Beneath them are great ocher brutes of cars, herds of them, stampeding violently with grinding grunts, and, on the microbish pave-

Williamsburg.

New East River Bridge.

Brooklyn.



East Twenty-Second Street.

All Souls' Church.

American Lithograph Building.

—ON THE RIGHT IN THE DISTANCE, IS THE LOWER EAST SIDE OF NEW YORK, A DENSELY CROWDED WILDERNESS OF SWARMING TENEMENTS.

Beyond is the slam-bang of the Sixth Avenue Elevated careering up-town and down, both ways at once. Parallely is the Subway, rumbling relentlessly. Farther east are two additional slam-bangers. To

ments, swarms such as Dante may indeed have seen, but not in paradise.

In the morning they are there, scurrying to their toil; at high noon to their food; at evening to their homes; at night

Brooklyn
Bridge.Skyscrapers of
lower New York.

VIEW FROM THE FLATIRON BUILDING, LOOKING TO THE SOUTHEAST, DOWN BROADWAY TO UNION SQUARE AND BEYOND.

Skyscrapers of
lower New York.

Statens
Island.

Statue of
Liberty.

Pennsylvania
Station.

Jersey
City.



Vernon Horsley Bailey 05

to amusements more laborious than their work. When they are not there you do not know it. Save at night, when the crowd moves elsewhere, always are there

rearing its knifish face with the same disdain of the ephemeral that the Sphinx displays, knowing that she has all time as we all have our day.

Jersey
City.

Hoboken.

Castle
Point.

Orange Mountain
(in distance).



Sohmer
Building.

West Twenty-
Second Street.

VIEW FROM THE FLATIRON BUILDING, LOOKING WESTWARD TO THE HUDSON RIVER AND BEYOND IT
TO THE NEW JERSEY SUBURBS—

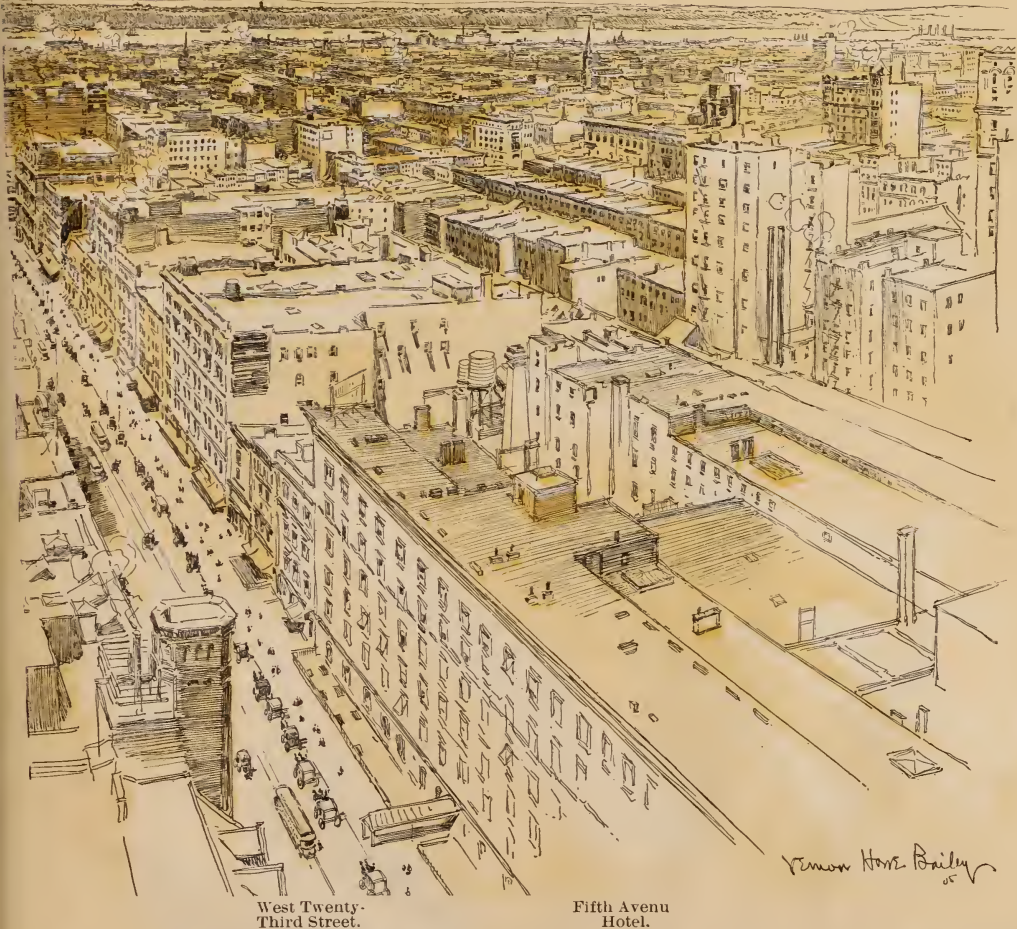
compact throngs, always are there streams of incarnated preoccupations, pouring from whence you cannot say, to where you cannot tell; human streams which the Flatiron cleaves indifferently,

Ages ago the Sphinx was disinterred from beneath masses of sand under which it had brooded interminably. Yet in its simian paws, its avian wings, in its body which is that of animal, in its face which

is that of a seer, there, before Darwin, before history, by a race that has left no other souvenir, in traits great and grave, the descent of man was told.

cisely as these huts were once regarded as supreme achievements, so, one of these days, from other and higher floors, the Flatiron may seem a hut itself.

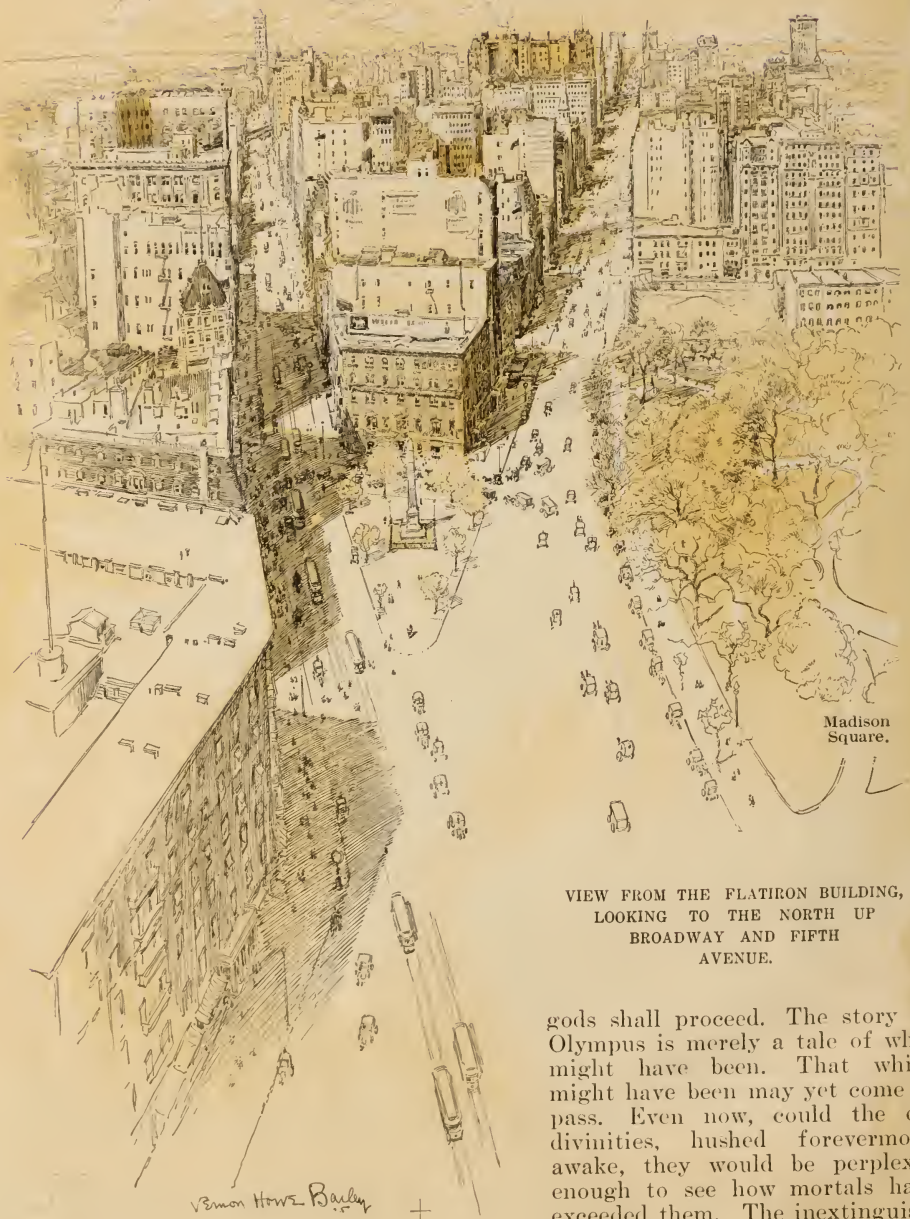
Weehawken.

West Shore
Station.The
Palisades.Subway
Power-House.

—THE RETAIL SHOPPING DISTRICT OF NEW YORK CENTERS AT ABOUT THIS POINT; IMMEDIATELY ABOVE IT (TO THE RIGHT) BEGINS THE REGION OF HOTELS AND THEATERS.

There remained his ascent. Ages hence the Flatiron may tell it. For as you lean and gaze from the toppest floors on houses below, which from those floors seem huts, it may occur to you that pre-

Evolution has not halted. Undiscernibly but indefatigably, always it is progressing. Its final term is not in existing buildings or in existing man. If humanity sprang from gorillas, from humanity

Upper
Broadway.Victoria
Hotel.Upper Fifth
Avenue.Belmont
Hotel.

VIEW FROM THE FLATIRON BUILDING,
LOOKING TO THE NORTH UP
BROADWAY AND FIFTH
AVENUE.

Fifth Avenue
Hotel.Worth
Monument.

gods shall proceed. The story of Olympus is merely a tale of what might have been. That which might have been may yet come to pass. Even now, could the old divinities, hushed forevermore, awake, they would be perplexed enough to see how mortals have exceeded them. The inextinguishable laughter which was theirs is absent from the prose of life. Commerce has alarmed their

afflatus away. But the telegraph is a better messenger than they had, the motor is surer than their chariots of dream. In Fifth Avenue inns they could get fairer fare than ambrosia, and behold women beside whom Venus would look provincial and Juno a frump. The spectacle of electricity tamed and domesticated would surprise them not a little, the Elevated quite as much, the Flatiron still more. At sight of the latter they would recall the Titans with whom once they warred, and slink to their sacred seas outfaced.

In the same measure that we have succeeded in exceeding them, so will posterity surpass what we have done. Evolution may be slow, but it is sure; yet, however slow, it achieved an unrecognized advance when it devised buildings such as this. It is demonstrable that small rooms breed small thoughts. It will be demonstrable that as buildings ascend so do ideas. It is mental progress that skyscrapers engender. From these parturitions gods may really proceed—beings, that is, who, could we remain long enough to see them, would regard us as we regard the apes.

Meanwhile, on those toppest floors, the eager sun, aslant, shuttles the mounting roar. In the noise and glare you need but a modicum of imagination to fancy yourself contemplating a volcano in active operation, one that is erupting gold, coining dollars in its depths, and tossing them in the crystalline air—whence they fall, as rain falls, on those who know enough not to come in, who get in the way, fight for a place, and hold it until they have made their pile. It is not of course from such as these that gods shall come, rather a race similar to the curious dwarfs of whom Pliny told, pygmies that passed their lives fighting with phantoms for coin. So, too, fight those that you behold from the toppest floors. The struggle is the impetus of their little lives, the substance of their loves and hates; it is the magnet that draws them from regions quasi-polar, wholly tropical, from zones remoter yet, from those nethermost planes where Dante went.

Above them, indifferently, the Flatiron looms. Semi-animate as the motor is, superhuman, vibrant with a life of its own, from its hundred eyes it stares. Below is Madison Square, circled with hotels, clubs, apartment houses, office-buildings, and a church. The church is that of Dr. Parkhurst. The vast building adjacent is an insurance company's—the Metropolitan Life. On the white

corner above is the Appellate Division of the State Supreme Court. On the next corner is the Madison Square Garden, the home of the horseshow, the circus, and the French ball. To the north and east gasp a few surviving huts. To the left, on Broadway, is the Fifth Avenue Hotel. In days gone by it was a great place for honeymoons. Now it is even a greater place for politicians of the Republican brand. A bit above is the Hoffman House, which the haunted Stokes made agreeable for everybody in general and for Democrats in particular. Higher up on Broadway are other hostels either equally famous or with the future in which to accumulate renown, the old Gilsey for instance, the older Victoria, the new Astor, and the Breslin newer still. On Fifth Avenue are more, the Holland, the Waldorf, the St. Regis. There, too, is the Knickerbocker Trust Company, quite Greek in appearance, and Tiffany's, which is quite as French.

Of the two thoroughfares, Broadway is the older. Originally called the Breede Weg, it began with the beginning of things, when New York was Nieu Amsterdam and talked Dutch instead of slang. The incipency of Fifth Avenue is more modern. It occurred a little prior to the Civil War. A bit later a residence thereon was endearingly regarded as quite equivalent to a title. As far as it went—and, until within relatively recent years, it did not straggle much above Forty-Second Street—it was a wholly residential stretch of brown-stone fronts.

The first to put a shop on the holy site was Mrs. Paran Stevens. The deed, highly radical, was regarded as sacrilege. The late Mr. Lorillard, a tobacco merchant, objected strenuously. Said Mrs. Stevens, who was quick with her tongue:

"You would not mind, now, would you, if it were a tobacco shop?"

Then Mr. Lorillard shut up. But that which the lady began others continued, the result being that residentially Fifth Avenue has moved from Washington Square to the Plaza.

West of it is the river to which Hudson came, viewing from his little boat silent spaces crammed now with tooting craft, where dock liners leviathan as skyscrapers. Further up are the Palisades. Further down is Staten Island, between which and Manhattan the original Vanderbilt pursued, like Sappho's lover, the highly genteel avocation of ferryman, landing his fares where rises the Immigration Bureau to-day and where the primal skyscrapers began.

Thence upward with the stream of life the city flows, halting occasionally, occasionally too circumscribed, as in the lower East Side, which is a caldron, or in the Chinese quarter, which is a sewer. Over the way there is a glimpse of the nameless shames of architectural Long Island, the infinite horrors of Williamsburg. Yet with the glimpse comes the saving savor of the salt of the sea. There are compensating vistas also, the pillars of the Brooklyn Bridge, the statue of Liberty, the high Byzantine dome on Park Row, more distantly the roof of the Pennsylvania Railway station, a roof presently to be duplicated not far from the Grand Central, in front of which already rises the unfinished Belmont House, the tallest of tall hotels.

Intermediately, a half dozen streets to the rear of the Flatiron, lies Union Square, a bedlam of business and traffic, but which within the memory of the present writer was a sedate residential quarter, girdled with balconied houses that were festooned with honeysuckle bursting in the eager spring. The peace that was there survives still in New York, but only in Gramercy Park and lower Fifth Avenue, which latter, fusing at Fourteenth Street with the general pandemonium, knows no respite until it reaches the auriferous precincts above the St. Regis and the Plaza, where the newer plutocracy resides.

Indifferently on these things the Flatiron stares. Its front is lifted to the future. On the past its back is turned. Of what has gone before it is American in its unconcern. Monstrous yet infantile, it is a recent issue of the gigantic upheaval that is transforming the whole city, and which will end by making it a curiosity to which people will come and stare as they do at cataracts and big caves and great trees and fat women and whatever else is abnormal. Yet the changes, however disconcerting, are but tokens of others to be. In certain aspects New York still preserves its old colonial squalor. In others it presents the hasty hideousness of boom towns. In the lingering streets of brown-stone fronts it is embryonic still. Near the rivers it has thoroughfares and avenues which, in ruthless atrocity and shuddersome ugliness, are nightmares in stone. But these are as measles and mumps to a child. They are not definite conditions. Nor is there, nor will there be, anything definite here until, from the Battery to the Plaza, the buildings one and all are so huge that nothing huger is possible.

Existing department stores are, one might think, sufficient in dimensions. Not a bit of it. A new one is planned that is to cover an entire square from Fifth Avenue to Madison, and to approach the Flatiron's height. The massiveness of that will be duplicated, triplicated, multiplied over the town. Sooner or later there, where now are, say, eighty or a hundred buildings to a square there will be but one. After the fashion of a Broadway department store which, outgrowing the square it occupies, has reached out and subterraneously annexed a building across the way—after this suggestive fashion it is indicated that emporiums of the future will cover two squares—three, perhaps; that no hotel, no apartment house or office-building will be really content with less than one, and that however it may be elsewhere, on the thirty-five streets between Twenty-Third Street and the Plaza, Fifth Avenue will contain not many more than seventy structures, about one to each square, structures extending back on the west to Broadway or Sixth Avenue, on the east to Madison, with, on these arteries, similar structures, similarly extending, repeating themselves to the river fronts.

That is what people will come to see. It will be horrible; but analyze the horrible, and sometimes you find the sublime, again the unique, occasionally the commercial. The three derivatives present here will provide a spectacle shameful and superb, a congerie of temples for the deification of gold, a city of basilicas for the glory of greed. In somnolent Nieuw Amsterdam, Nicholas was patron saint. These shall be the gods of Manhattan. Yet are not its deities now these divinities, whose worship is haste, whose incense is noise, and whose swarming suppliants you mistake, from those upper floors, for insects?

Tennyson compared humanity to so many gnats in the glare of a million million of suns. Insects they are. But they shall pass as Nieuw Amsterdam passed, as passed the race unknown that left the Sphinx.

In their stead will be beings more august. In the mounting wonders of the city to be, humanity will mount also. It will deny its false gods, reverse their altars, and, on the pile it has made, reconstruct Olympus. From the toppest floors you get a vision of that in the significant sunsets and prophetic dawns. You see strange things from the Flatiron.

